

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

May, 2019

DAY OF REASON BRUNCH - MAY 5 - PAGE 7 - BOOK NOW!

Are we now the largest (just barely) “religious” demographic in America? Are we finally taking our seat at the political table? Are we ready for A.I., is the internet God, and is shame dead? What are the four zeros, who is the no-hope (but maybe best) candidate, and is science cap-D Democrat? One certainty: our Day of Reason trumps (forgive the word choice) their Day of Prayer. —JR

THE NATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER INSULTS REASON AND MOCKS THE U.S. CONSTITUTION

Michael Stone

(Excerpted from Progressive Secular Humanist on patheos.com, 5/2/2018)

An exercise in religious superstition and ignorance, the National Day of Prayer is more than an insult to common sense and reason, it is a clear violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment ... a government endorsement of religion.

According to federal law, the first Thursday of every May is the official National Day of Prayer. Enacted by Congress in 1952 and signed into law by President Harry Truman, it is a product of the anti-communist fear and paranoia of the Cold War era. ...

The early-May date [*May 2 this year*] was put in place by President Ronald Reagan as a direct counterpoint to May Day workers celebrations.

As per Americans United for Separation of Church and State:

The National Day of Prayer has become a vehicle for spreading religious misinformation and fundamentalist Christian doctrine under the aegis of the government – precisely what the framers were seeking to prohibit.

The U.S. government has no business promoting religious superstition and ignorance, no business telling Americans how and when to pray, and no business encouraging what is at best mental masturbation.

A National Day of Prayer is a bad precedent for all Americans, religious and non-religious alike. A government that can tell you to pray is a government that can force you not to pray, or mandate how you will pray.

We are a secular nation, free to worship, or not, as we please; a National Day of Prayer is a threat to that freedom.

INJECTING RELIGION INTO GOVERNMENT: WHAT COULD POSSIBLY GO WRONG?

Jonathan Engel

In 2014 the Supreme Court held, in *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, that municipalities can open their public town meetings with a prayer recited by a clergyman. Not surprisingly, the case resulted in a 5-4 decision, along the usual conservative/liberal lines (5 conservatives voting in favor, 4 liberals dissenting). But in this case even the liberal dissents (by Justices Breyer and Kagan) got it wrong.

Breyer’s dissent stated that the use of opening prayers in *Town of Greece* was permissible in and of itself, but that the Town should have done more to make its legislative prayers inclusive of other religions (the Town meeting prayers had been given almost exclusively by Protestant clergy). Likewise, Justice Kagan stated in dissent that the Town’s practices would pass Constitutional muster if chaplains were told that their prayers must be “non-denominational”, or if the Town invited clergy from all different religions to give the prayer. When the case was decided I thought that all of the justices were wrong to validate state-sponsored prayer, and recent events have only confirmed my belief.

The *Town of Greece* decision immediately brought to the fore the issue of who, exactly, would be allowed to give invocations at the start of municipal functions. The Court said that invocations could not be limited to Christian clergy, and that opened the door to other groups. Secularists began petitioning local governments to be allowed to open their meetings with non-religious statements of good will and best wishes. Other, more mischievous atheists claimed to be from the “Church of Satan” and demanded equal time for themselves. This put municipalities in the awkward (and Constitutionally dubious) position of having to determine which sects were “legitimate” enough to be included among

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those giving opening “prayers”.

Two recent contretemps have illustrated the danger and folly of the *Town of Greece* decision. In Georgia, Pastor Doyle Kelley opened a State House session by stating that 70 percent of Georgians are “on their way to Hell” (for not being sufficiently subservient to the “one true God”, Jesus Christ) because “The command is there: Do all in the name of Jesus Christ.” Why should non-Christians have to listen to this? They have the Constitutional right to not be subjected to religious hectoring that they do not believe in as they’re sitting in the State House waiting for this tripe to be over so they can do their jobs.

In Pennsylvania it was even worse. On the day that the first Muslim woman to serve in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives was to be sworn in, the invocation was given by Representative Stephanie Borowicz, who used her time in the spotlight to make sure that the new Islam-practicing representative would understand just how unwelcome she was. Mentioning Jesus at least 13 times in her little talk, Rep. Borowicz said “God forgive us – Jesus – we’ve lost sight of you, we’ve forgotten you, God, in our country, and we’re asking you to forgive us Jesus ... I claim all these things in the powerful, mighty name of Jesus, in the name of Jesus, every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess, Jesus, that you are Lord, in Jesus’ name.”

Not *my* lord. Not *my* knee. Not *my* tongue. And not that of the Hon. Movita Johnson-Harrell, the first Muslim woman to serve in the PA House of Representatives. Not exactly “Welcome to the Legislature; nice to have you.” So here we have a state legislator, given the opportunity to give an invocation, which she uses to let all of Pennsylvania know that Jesus is Lord and that anybody who doesn’t think so will eventually “bow down”. I reiterate: Prayers in public settings: What could possibly go wrong?

Look at the divisiveness we’ve unleashed by allowing group prayer in public settings, and toward what end? There is no need for this. In what way would the work of a governmental entity be prevented or inhibited if the public servants in question did not start the session with a group prayer? What, they can’t hear an application for a zoning variance unless they all pray together and out-loud first? I’ve participated in hundreds of meetings in my life, and the lack of a pre-meeting out-loud prayer (remember that no one can stop anyone from praying silently at any time or place) had no effect on our work. If you sit on a city council or are a member of a state legislature, your job is to represent the taxpayers and craft reasonable, effective legislation, not to lead your constituents to Jesus or any other deity.

But now that we’ve opened this particular can, look at all the worms that have crawled out.

It probably will not be long until the churches will divide as sharply upon political, as upon theological questions; and when that day comes, if there are not liberals enough to hold the balance of power, this Government will be destroyed. The liberty of man is not safe in the hands of any church.

– Robert Green Ingersoll

WE’RE NUMBER ONE! REALLY. NO ST, NUMBER ONE. REALLY.**

Hemant Mehta

(Excerpted from “Nones Are Statistically Tied for the Largest ‘Religious’ Group” at patheos.com)

According to just released 2018 data from the General Social Survey, “Nones” are now the largest single “religious” demographic in the country (23.1 percent), statistically tied with Catholics (23.0 percent) and just above evangelical Christians (22.5 percent).

While the single data point may not tell you much ... the “No religion” [trend line] just keeps getting higher and higher, apparently pulling people from mainline Christian denominations and maybe some evangelicals, too.

According to Professor Ryan P. Burge of Eastern Illinois University, this trend shows no sign of slowing down.

“The unaffiliated have had a much more dramatic trajectory, starting at just 1 in 20 of GSS respondents back in 1972. The nones experienced big jumps in 1993 and 1998, and have added, on average, 1-1.5 percentage points every 2 years for the last 10 years.

“Their continued growth has been well-documented and at this point, expected. The big finding in 2018 is that those of “no religion” are now as common as evangelicals, both about 23 percent of the population.

“The difference between these groups is not statistically significant at this point; but I see no reason to think that the nones will level off anytime soon. If the nones maintain their growth while evangelicals stagnate, it is statistically inevitable that those of no religious faith will be the largest group in America in the next five years.”

Given that the two largest religious denominations in the country – Catholics and Southern Baptists – are facing sexual abuse scandals that could go on for years to come, I wouldn’t be surprised if people who still believe in God leave those denominations altogether.

The next step has to be figuring out how to convert more of those “Nones” into a voting bloc that cares about issues like church/state separation and civil rights. Having more of us makes no difference if conservative evangelicals punch above their weight at the ballot box.

GIMME THAT NEW-TIME RELIGION: SIMPLE ANSWERS AND FEEL-GOOD SOLUTIONS **Zach Weinersmith**

(From “Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal”, 4/12/2019)

Simpleton: Pastor, how can you believe in free will *and* an omniscient God?

New-Time Pastor: Simple. I believe God sets the outline of the story but gives us some discretion over the particulars.

Simp: Wow! That’s exactly complex enough for me to not have to think any harder about it.

New-Time Pastor: Can I interest you in my book that makes you feel good about whatever it is you’re already doing?

Simp: Do you accept wads of cash?

SECULAR POLITICS, ONE TEENY-TINY BABY STEP AT A TIME

Hemant Mehta

(Based on 3/31/19 and 4/2/19 posts on *patheos.com*.)

In Congress ...

Rep. Jared Huffman is (officially and finally) the only openly “Humanist” member. When the Pew Research Center released its list of the religious affiliations of everyone in Congress, as it does every two years, only one member was listed as “Unaffiliated” (Sen. Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona). Another 18 were listed as “don’t know” or “refused”.

From my perspective, that meant there were literally no openly non-religious politicians. That was odd for two reasons. First, how the hell could we have 535 members of Congress without a single person willing to use the word “atheist” (or some reasonable synonym)?

Second, didn’t Rep. Jared Huffman say he was non-religious? He did! In 2017, the California Democrat announced that he was a humanist (With a small “h”, if that matters). In an interview with the *Washington Post*, he specifically said the phrase, “I suppose you could say I don’t believe in God.”

[But] CQ Roll Call just released the latest version of its “Congress At Your Fingertips” directory — think of it as a concise profile of every member of Congress along with their top staffers — and in this edition, Huffman is finally (finally!) listed as a Humanist. With a goddamn capital “H” whether he likes it or not.

Because this is the source that Pew Research draws its information from, that means when the next list is released after the 2020 elections, there will finally be an openly, explicitly non-religious member of Congress. At least one.

In Nebraska ...

Atheists now have their own caucus in the Democratic Party. Over the past few years, the Democratic Party has approved the formation of a “Secular Caucus” in a handful of states. Texas, Utah, and Arizona have all said yes to taking into account atheists’ ideas when drafting platform measures and advising candidates. (The Libertarian Party has also done the same thanks to a former New Hampshire representative.)

It’s a formal way to give atheists a seat at the table in a way that goes beyond mere symbolism.

Now a group of atheists in Nebraska are joining the mix. After first launching in March of 2018, the Nebraska Secular Democrats are now officially part of the state’s Democratic Party.

There was some pushback against the caucus from some people who felt there shouldn’t be “faith” caucuses of any kind, and that all caucuses should be issue-orientated, but the caucus was ultimately approved.

What does that mean, practically speaking? Joseph Couch, the chair of the caucus, says the affiliation will grant the group access to the Voter Access Network (the party’s database of voters and supporters) as well as those who “understand the political process.” All of that is useful,

he says, for his goal of making sure atheists in the state are represented on Election Day. (We regularly vote beneath our weight. While roughly 30-40 percent of the nation is unaffiliated with religion, only 17 percent of voters said the same thing in 2018.) The caucus will also be able to receive members-only training.

Couch also has a long-term plan: getting more atheists elected to public office. (Nebraska has two openly non-religious senators: Megan Hunt (a newly-elected senator who uses the label “atheist”) and Ernie Chambers (who’s been a senator for decades and who doesn’t use any religious label). You can’t elect more, though, without first organizing a bloc of voters who would support those candidates and making other voters comfortable with them.

(Comment: Two cheers for small gains. On the other hand ...)

THE DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE YOU’VE NEVER HEARD OF WHO DOESN’T STAND A CHANCE IN HELL BECAUSE OF STATEMENTS LIKE THIS

Meet Rep. John Delaney, 3-term (2013-2019) congressman who represented Maryland’s 6th district and is a no-hope-in-hell candidate for president because he thinks like, well, like you and me.



“I don’t think the teachings of my church should inform the public policy decisions that I make in this country.

I mean, *Roe v. Wade* is the law of the land. I support *Roe v. Wade* as the law of the land, and as the president of the United States, I will be an unwavering supporter of that.

“Our faith informs things my wife and I would do in our own personal lives, but that should be separate than the government. I mean, to me, it’s pretty simple actually. Everyone has the ability to have freedom of religion in this country, which is so sacred, and to basically live their personal lives pursuant to an approach or a code. And all religions have different things that people do, whether they’re kosher or they’re this or that, but when it comes to governing, the separation of church and state is incredibly, incredibly important.”

SO, WHAT’S THE “REPUBLICAN THING”?

Although then-Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke (who is now out of office and hiding from congressional corruption investigators) claimed that the abrupt 2017 cancellation of a study into the health effects of mountaintop removal for coal-mining was canceled after a careful review of the grant process, a coal-industry lobbyist and newly-appointed policy advisor within the Department’s Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement named Landon “Tucker” Davis has offered a likelier explanation for why a study that was more than halfway done was abruptly shut down. He said (really!) ...

“Science is a Democrat thing.”

IS “CONSCIOUS” A.I. POSSIBLE? MORE IMPORTANT: DO WE WANT IT?

Daniel C. Dennett

(On March 9th, more than 1200 people jammed into Pioneer Works in Red Hook, Brooklyn, for a conversation between two of our greatest philosophers, David Chalmers and Daniel C. Dennett: “Is Superintelligence Impossible?” the latest event in Edge’s ongoing “Possible Minds Project”. Following is an excerpt from Dennett’s opening remarks. Watch the video, listen to the EdgeCast, read the full transcript, at edge.org/conversation/david_chalmers-daniel_c_dennett-is-superintelligence-impossible. — JR)

Let’s talk about “possible” for the moment. There are lots of things that are possible, and philosophers love to talk about what’s possible, but many things that are obviously possible are never going to be actual. It’s possible to build a bridge across the Atlantic. We’re not going to do it, not now, not in a hundred years, not in a thousand years. It would cost too much money and would be a foolish endeavor. A lot of the imagined AI projects that are perfectly possible in principle are not worth doing. In fact, some of them are definitely things that we shouldn’t do because they’ll make more problems for us than they’ll solve. Just bear that in mind.

Somebody said that the philosopher is the one who says, “We know it’s possible in practice, we’re trying to figure out if it’s possible in principle.” Unfortunately, philosophers sometimes spend too much time worrying about logical possibilities that are importantly negligible in every other regard. So, let me go on the record as saying, yes, I think that conscious AI is possible because, after all, what are we? We’re conscious. We’re robots made of robots made of robots. We’re actual. In principle, you could make us out of other materials. Some of your best friends in the future could be robots. Possible in principle, absolutely no secret ingredients, but we’re not going to see it. We’re not going to see it for various reasons. One is, if you want a conscious agent, we’ve got plenty of them around and they’re quite wonderful, whereas the ones that we would make would be not so wonderful.

For me, one of the important fears about the future is that long before we got to superintelligence, we would have human beings who are so dependent on non-super-intelligences that we would become fragile and brittle in some very important ways. We might call that the GPS problem magnified. People have begun not being able to read maps anymore or know how to get anywhere without the help of GPS. Use it or lose it. Use it or lose it is going to play a big role in everybody’s lives in the immediate future.

Is there anybody in this room that knows an algorithm for extracting the square root? I learned one in school when I was in about eighth grade. It’s not easy, but there are algorithms for doing a square root, which nobody bothers with anymore. Nobody knows how to do that because you just hit that little button on your hand calculator. Many more important talents are going to atrophy and disappear

except in the hands of cranky craftsmen. They’ll still know how to make a horseshoe with a hammer, an anvil, and a simple forge. They’ll be able to read a map and drive a car and other weird things like that while the rest of us are simply disabled in those regards. That’s something that worries me.

Even more, what worries me is that we will for the very best of reasons turn over our responsibility for making major decisions to artificial intelligences that are not conscious and not super, they’re just very intelligent tools that are great fabrics of pattern recognition and so forth. Who knew twenty years ago there could be such things? We know now that there are—deep learning, et cetera—but when you start delegating major life decisions to systems that are basically just smart tools, then this changes our human predicament in a very important way. My slogan about this is we want smart tools, intelligent tools, not artificial colleagues. The difference is that an artificial colleague is somebody who can take responsibility to be a co-author and be morally responsible for decisions made. We’re nowhere near that with artificial intelligence.

Alan Turing, one of my all-time heroes, set in motion one thing which I regret, and that is that the Turing Test puts a premium on deception, on convincing human beings that they’re talking to a human being. I know why he did it, it was a brilliant idea, but ever since then there has been this premium on what we might call the Disneyfication of artificial intelligence—making AIs that seem more human. They’re basically false advertising. Whether we’re talking about Siri, or Watson, or any of the others, they have this paper-thin human user interface which is deeply deceptive about what they understand. That’s false advertising. It should not be honored, but rather criticized and condemned.

We should get out of the habit of treating AIs as agents when they’re not. The reason this is going to be hard is that, as a number of people are foreseeing, the major market for AI is going to be elder care. And why not? Taking care of elderly folks who can’t take care of themselves is not a good life for a regular human being. It’s maybe worse than being an old-fashioned telephone operator. We don’t regret the loss of those jobs. In elder care, there will be good market reasons for Disneyfying AI to a very great extent because old folks will want to have a companion, not just somebody that brushes their teeth and gets them fed and so forth. I do not like the future that is populated by millions and millions of old folks who are settling for an artificial companion that is a fake in most important regards.

All the world’s major religions, with their emphasis on love, compassion, patience, tolerance, and forgiveness can and do promote inner values. But the reality of the world today is that grounding ethics in religion is no longer adequate. This is why I am increasingly convinced that the time has come to find a way of thinking about spirituality and ethics beyond religion altogether.

— The Dalai Lama

DOING THE MATH TO THE FOUR ZEROS

David Rafferty

(Reprinted from Greenwich Time, 4/14/2019)

An unfortunate consequence of the 2016 election was the continued acceleration of the Great Stupiding of America, as evidenced by the growing acceptance of those who for whatever reason, disavow, disbelieve or are just disinterested in science. Most alarmingly, environmental science and climate change. So in honor of Earth Day, let's put aside the ridiculousness of arguments like "if it's snowing the planet can't be warming" or that scientists are part of an evil cabal trying to take away your pickup truck. Let's look at this in a way most Americans understand: money.

We'll start, however, with some unshakable, universal, scientific truths: the first two laws of thermodynamics. The first, the law of conservation of energy, states that in an isolated system, energy cannot be created or destroyed. The second says that the state of entropy of an isolated system will always increase over time, and that as energy is disbursed or transformed, more is wasted.

Why am I talking science when I promised I'd talk about money? Because first I want you to ignore all the arguments you usually hear about climate change, green energy, science deniers and hippie do-gooders, and focus only on one thing.

Earth is an isolated system. All the fossil fuels that will ever be, are here now. There. Will. Be. No. More. Ergo, the availability of all remaining high-grade combustible energy (oil, gas, coal) is decreasing, as it's being utilized and dispersed. Similar energy cannot be created in our isolated system; therefore all new energy must come from elsewhere. Our economy however, where "the market" demands endless growth, is reliant on the consumption of high-grade, combustible energy, which is governed by the remorseless, ironclad laws of thermodynamics. Therefore, our economy, as currently configured, is completely unsustainable.

Dollars and sense. Democrat or Republican. Prius or SUV. The American economy is based on consuming oil, coal and gas for many purposes, and whether you "believe" it or not, one day our ability to sustain ourselves using fossil fuels will run out. So here's the question of the millennium: we need a new economy approach to energy and resources, so why not now?

Look, the nattering nabobs of negativity love to laugh at Tesla owners. They point to ineffective and expensive waste recycling programs, and things like inefficient solar panels and batteries and pronounce that the old ways are and always will be the best. Not only is that foolish and shortsighted, it makes no long-term economic sense. We need to start de-carbonizing and minimizing waste today and we need the power of American industry — with the encouragement of American political leadership — to lead the way. Bringing a snowball onto the Senate floor to convince people climate change isn't real doesn't help and it only convinces most people that Senators are imbeciles.

Is recycling expensive and not terribly effective? Yes. So should we stop recycling? No. The answer has to be: let's get better at it. In fact, we should be getting better at all the things we can and should do to achieve, as one prominent energy innovator put it, the "four zeros". We should have zero-emissions transportation, zero-waste manufacturing, zero-net energy buildings and a zero-carbon power grid.

How do we hit these benchmarks? First, we have to stop pretending everything is great just the way it is, because it isn't. Maybe some of these Green New Deal ideas being tossed around (the real ones, not the phony scare tactics concocted by right-wing zealots), with a goal of "a national, industrial, economic mobilization plan to rapidly transition the country away from fossil fuels and toward clean energy, such as solar, wind, and electric cars" are a decent place to start.

We need the political will, with a return to fact-based thinking, and a creative approach to incentivize new and established businesses, to help re-establish the United States as the leader of the next great industrial revolution. Stop arguing about climate, stop joking about conservation efforts, and start the race to getting rich perfecting green technologies. There's money to be made in being the company that helps us get to the four zeros.

And if we save the planet in the process? Awesome.

RACHEL CARSON'S BITTERSWEET FAREWELL TO THE WORLD: TIMELESS ADVICE TO THE NEXT GENERATION FROM THE WOMAN WHO CATALYZED THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

(Excerpted from *Brain Pickings* by Maria Popova, an *Earth Day* special, 4/22/2019)

In June 1962, five days before the first installment of *Silent Spring* made its debut in *The New Yorker*, the terminally ill Rachel Carson took her very first cross-country jetliner flight and delivered a long-awaited commencement address at Scripps College in California. It was a crystallization of Carson's moral philosophy, a farewell to the world she so cherished, and her baton-passing of that cherishment to the next generation. She told graduates:

Today our whole earth has become only another shore from which we look out across the dark ocean of space, uncertain what we shall find when we sail out among the stars. ... The stream of time moves forward and mankind moves with it. Your generation must come to terms with the environment. You must face realities instead of taking refuge in ignorance and evasion of truth. Yours is a grave and sobering responsibility, but it is also a shining opportunity. You go out into a world where mankind is challenged, as it has never been challenged before, to prove its maturity and its mastery — not of nature, but of itself.

Therein lies our hope and our destiny.

I have one share in corporate Earth, and I am nervous about the management. — E.B. White

SHSNY CALENDAR: MAY - JULY 2019

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, MAY 2, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

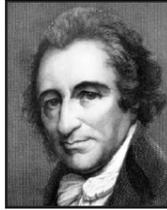
28 East 35 St. (front lounge)
We'll discuss

THE AGE OF REASON:

*Being an Investigation of True
and Fabulous Theology*

Thomas Paine

Paine, who had ridiculed monarchy and inspired American patriotism during the Revolution with *Common Sense*, turned his intellect and wit on revealed religion in *The Age of Reason*.



Although deist rather than atheist, the book shook the American and (especially) English establishments that were horrified by the bloody French Revolution. Even a century later, Teddy Roosevelt called Paine a "filthy little atheist".

Adolph Freda will lead.

– *Paperback and Kindle available.*

Join us even if you haven't
finished reading.

The SHSNY Book Club
is open to all ... and free!

PLANNING AHEAD

The usual SHSNY schedule (barring blizzards, holidays and schedule conflicts/screwups) is ...

Book Club: First Thursday

at the Community Church of NY
Fiction Book Club: 2nd Tuesday
at Nancy Adelman's apartment

Brunch: Third Sunday

at Stone Creek Lounge

Drinking Reasonably

Third Wednesday

at Vino Levantino Wine Bar

Great Lectures on DVD

4th Wednesday

at Stone Creek Lounge.

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, JUNE 6, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York

**WHEN CHINA RULED THE
SEAS: The Treasure Fleet of
the Dragon Throne, 1405-33**

Louise Levathes

A hundred years before Columbus and his fellow Europeans began making their way to the New World, fleets of giant Chinese junks commanded by the eunuch admiral Zheng He and filled with the empire's finest porcelains, lacquerware, and silk ventured to the edge of the world's "four corners". It was a time of exploration and conquest, but it ended in a retrenchment so complete that less than a century later, it was a crime to go to sea in a multimasted ship.

Levathes brings readers inside China's most illustrious scientific and technological era.

Earle Bowers will lead.

– *Paperback and Kindle available.*

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, JULY 11, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York

**SECULAR BUDDHISM
Imagining the Dharma
in an Uncertain World**

Stephen Batchelor

Ranging widely in this collection (reincarnation, meditation, the arts), Batchelor offers a detailed picture of contemporary Buddhism and its attempt to find a voice in the modern world.

– *Paperback and Kindle available.*

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BRUNCH & CONVERSATION

SUN, MAY 19, 11:30 am
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

We gather in the saloon's back room, where the pub-grub menu includes a \$15 breakfast special, the Bloody Marys are hot, the beer is cold, and conversation sparkles.



Come join 20 or more fellow freethinkers for food, fun and convivial conversation, including the Dorothy Kahn-led ...

After-Brunch Discussion:

Are there limits to free thought?

DRINKING REASONABLY

WED, MAY 15, 6-10:00 pm
Vino Levantino Wine Bar
210 West 94 Street

(Broadway - Amsterdam Aves)



Get together with other NYC freethinkers in the various groups of the Reasonable New York coalition (including SHSNY) for fellowship, networking, pub

grub and reasonable imbibing.

We – humanists, skeptics, rationalists, atheists, agnostics, freethinkers of every stripe – meet and mingle, discuss the issues of the day and whatever else is on our minds.

And just have fun.

Come anytime for any length of time 6-10, or come at 6:00 and enjoy Happy Hour prices until 7:00.

Don't drink alcohol? Don't let that stop you from joining in the conversation and the fun.

SHSNY CALENDAR: MAY - JULY 2019

SHSNY FICTION BOOK CLUB

TUE, MAY 14, 7:00 pm

Nancy Adelman's apartment

205 Third Ave (6H) (18-19 Sts)

Come for wine, cheese, and sparkling conversation about

PRECIOUS BANE

Mary Webb

A forgotten classic set in rural Shropshire at the turn of the 19th century blends a simple, rustic love story with a profound sense of nature's mystic truth. Skillfully woven through this story is the aura of the English countryside, its flora and fauna anticipating every turn of the plot.

To reserve your seat on the sofa, and/or to nominate the next book for us to read, contact: editor@shsny.org

Advance-Reading Notice:

For June 11 - *The Judges of the Secret Court*, by David Stacton;

July 9 - *The Milagro Beanfield War*, by John Nichols

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD

WED, MAY 22, 7 pm

Stone Creek Bar & Lounge

140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

THE CREATIVE

DESTRUCTION OF MEDICINE

How the Digital Revolution Will Create Better Health Care
Dr. Eric Topol

What happens when you combine cellular phone technology with the medical revolution? How will minute biological sensors alter the way we treat lethal illnesses, such as heart attacks?

A leading cardiologist, gene hunter and medical thinker, Topol draws us to the very front lines of medicine and leaves us with a view of a landscape that is both foreign and daunting.

Book now to guarantee your place!

SUNDAY, MAY 5, NOON

SHSNY's 12th Annual DAY OF REASON BRUNCH
at PETE'S TAVERN, 129 East 18 Street

Our featured speaker will be our new President:

JONATHAN ENGEL

on

"SHSNY: Today and Tomorrow"

Jon has ideas! About SHSNY's leadership position in the New York and the national freethought communities ... about the issues and problems SHSNY should address and the causes we should support ... about educating the larger community about freethought in general and secular humanism in particular ... and about building membership, especially attracting younger members.



He wants to share those ideas with you, and he wants to hear what *you* have to say.

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A GOD PROBLEM (OR TWO OR THREE)

Peter Atterton

(Reprinted from "A God Problem", on the OpEd page of The New York Times, 2/25/2019)

Perfect. All-powerful. All-knowing. The idea of the deity most Westerners accept is actually not coherent. If you look up "God" in a dictionary, the first entry you will find will be something along the lines of "a being believed to be the infinitely perfect, wise and powerful creator and ruler of the universe". Certainly, if applied to non-Western contexts, the definition would be puzzling, but in a Western context this is how philosophers have traditionally understood "God". In fact, this conception of God is sometimes known as the "God of the Philosophers".

As a philosopher myself, I'd like to focus on a specific question: Does the idea of a morally perfect, all-powerful, all-knowing God make sense? Does it hold together when we examine it logically?

Let's first consider the attribute of omnipotence.

You've probably heard the paradox of the stone before: Can God create a stone that cannot be lifted? If God can create such a stone, then He is not all powerful, since He Himself cannot lift it. On the other hand, if He cannot create a stone that cannot be lifted, then He is not all powerful, since He cannot create the unliftable stone. Either way, God is not all powerful.

The way out of this dilemma is usually to argue, as Saint Thomas Aquinas did, that God cannot do self-contradictory things. Thus, God cannot lift what is by definition "unliftable", just as He cannot "create a square circle" or get divorced (since He is not married). God can only do that which is logically possible.

Not all philosophers agree with Aquinas. René Descartes, for example, believed that God could do absolutely anything, even the logically impossible, such as draw a round square. But even if we accept, for the sake of argument, Aquinas' explanation, there are other problems to contend with. For example, can God create a world in which evil does not exist? This does appear to be logically possible. Presumably God could have created such a world without contradiction. It evidently would be a world very different from the one we currently inhabit, but a possible world all the same. Indeed, if God is morally perfect, it is difficult to see why he wouldn't have created such a world. So why didn't He?

The standard defense is that evil is necessary for free will. According to the well-known Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga,

"To create creatures capable of moral good, [God] must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so."

However, this does not explain so-called physical evil (suffering) caused by nonhuman causes (famines, earthquakes, etc.). Nor does it explain, as Charles Darwin noticed, why there should be so much pain and suffering

among the animal kingdom: "A being so powerful and so full of knowledge as a God who could create the universe, is to our finite minds omnipotent and omniscient, and it revolts our understanding to suppose that his benevolence is not unbounded, for what advantage can there be in the sufferings of millions of the lower animals throughout almost endless time?"

What about God's infinite knowledge — His omniscience? Philosophically, this presents us with no less of a conundrum. Leaving aside the highly implausible idea that God knows all the facts in the universe, no matter how trivial or useless (Saint Jerome thought it was beneath the dignity of God to concern Himself with such base questions as how many fleas are born or die every moment), if God knows all there is to know, then He knows at least as much as we know. But if He knows what we know, then this would appear to detract from His perfection. Why?

There are some things that we know that, if they were also known to God, would automatically make Him a sinner, which of course is in contradiction with the concept of God. As the late American philosopher Michael Martin has already pointed out, if God knows all that is knowable, then God must know things that we do, like lust and envy. But one cannot know lust and envy unless one has experienced them. But to have had feelings of lust and envy is to have sinned, in which case God cannot be morally perfect.

What about malice? Could God know what malice is like and still retain His divine goodness? The 19-century German pessimist Arthur Schopenhauer was perhaps the first philosopher to draw attention to what he called the "diabolical" in his work *On Human Nature*:

"For man is the only animal which causes pain to others without any further purpose than just to cause it. Other animals never do it except to satisfy their hunger, or in the rage of combat No animal ever torments another for the mere purpose of tormenting, but man does it, and it is this that constitutes the diabolical feature in his character which is so much worse than the merely animal."

It might be argued, of course, that this is precisely what distinguishes humans from God. Human beings are inherently sinful whereas God is morally perfect. But if God knows everything, then God must know at least as much as human beings do. And if human beings know what it is like to want to inflict pain on others for pleasure's sake, without any other benefit, then so does God. But to say that God knows what it is like to want to inflict pain on others is to say that God is capable of malicious enjoyment.

However, this cannot be true if it really is the case that God is morally perfect. A morally perfect being would never get enjoyment from causing pain to others. Therefore, God doesn't know what it is like to be human. In that case He doesn't know what we know. But if God doesn't know what we know, God is not all knowing, and the concept of God is contradictory. God cannot be both omniscient and morally perfect. Hence, God could not exist.

(I shall here ignore the argument that God knows what

it is like to be human through Christ, because the doctrine of the Incarnation presents us with its own formidable difficulties: Was Christ really and fully human? Did he have sinful desires that he was required to overcome when tempted by the devil? Can God die?)

It is logical inconsistencies like these that led the 17th-century French theologian Blaise Pascal to reject reason as a basis for faith and return to the Bible and revelation. It is said that when Pascal died his servant found sewn into his jacket the words: "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob – not of the philosophers and scholars." Evidently, Pascal considered there was more "wisdom" in biblical revelation than in any philosophical demonstration of God's existence and nature – or plain lack thereof.

MAYBE THE INTERNET IS GOD

Nathan Englander

(Transcribed from a 4/3/2019 NPR "All Things Considered" interview of Mr. Englander, author of Kaddish.com, and forwarded by Gretchen Robinson)

On the idea that the all-knowing Internet has some similarities to an all-knowing God, we have built beta God.

If you have a phone and live in a city, or Google anything, [the internet] really does know everything you've done, what you're doing, what you're doing next. So I was like, the question, "Could God exist in an all-knowing way?" ... we've sort of already got that, because my Instagram feed is scary at this point. It knows what I'm hungry for.

HERE ARE THE TOP 10 REASONS I DON'T BELIEVE IN GOD

(Reason #6)

Greta Christina

*(Editor: Ms. Christina's new book is *Why Are You Atheists So Angry? 99 Things That Piss Off the Godless*. We're excerpting her "Top 10" in these pages – from her post on AlterNet, 12/14/2018 – one or two at a time.)*

Does God exist?" is a valid and relevant question; here are my Top Ten reasons why the answer is a resounding "No".

**6: The physical causes
of everything we think of as the "soul".**

The sciences of neurology and neuropsychology are in their infancy. But they are advancing by astonishing leaps and bounds, even as we speak. And what they are finding – consistently, thoroughly, across the board – is that, whatever consciousness is, it is inextricably linked to the brain.

Everything we think of as the soul—consciousness, identity, character, free will—all of that is powerfully affected by physical changes to the brain and body. Changes in the brain result in changes in consciousness ... sometimes so drastically they make a personality unrecognizable. Changes in consciousness can be seen, with magnetic resonance imagery, as changes in the brain. Illness, injury, drugs and medicines, sleep deprivation, etc., all of these can make changes to the supposed "soul", both subtle

and dramatic. And death, of course, is a physical change that renders a person's personality and character, not only unrecognizable, but non-existent.

So the obvious conclusion is that consciousness and identity, character and free will, are products of the brain and the body. They're biological processes, governed by laws of physical cause and effect. With any other phenomenon, if we can show that physical forces and actions produce observable effects, we think of that as a physical phenomenon. Why should the "soul" be any different?

What's more, the evidence supporting this conclusion comes from rigorously-gathered, carefully-tested, thoroughly cross-checked, double-blinded, placebo-controlled, replicated, peer-reviewed research. The evidence has been gathered, and continues to be gathered, using the gold standard of scientific evidence: methods specifically designed to filter out biases and cognitive errors as much as humanly possible. And it's not just a little research. It's an enormous mountain of research ... a mountain that's growing more mountainous every day.

The hypothesis of the soul, on the other hand, has not once in all of human history been supported by good, solid scientific evidence. That's pretty surprising when you think about it. For decades, and indeed centuries, most scientists had some sort of religious beliefs, and most of them believed in the soul. So a great deal of early science was dedicated to proving the soul's existence, and discovering and exploring its nature. It wasn't until after decades upon decades of fruitless research in this area that scientists finally gave it up as a bad job, and concluded, almost unanimously, that the reason they hadn't found a soul was that there was no such thing.

Are there unanswered questions about consciousness? Absolutely. Tons of them. No reputable neurologist or neuropsychologist would say otherwise. But think again about how the history of human knowledge is the history of supernatural explanations being replaced by natural ones ... with relentless consistency, again, and again, and again. There hasn't been a single exception to this pattern. Why would we assume that the soul is going to be that exception? Why would we assume that this gap in our knowledge, alone among all the others, is eventually going to be filled with a supernatural explanation? The historical pattern doesn't support it. And the evidence doesn't support it. The increasingly clear conclusion of the science is that consciousness is a product of the brain. Period.

We all ought to understand we're on our own. Believing in Santa Claus doesn't do kids any harm for a few years but it isn't smart for them to continue waiting all their lives for him to come down the chimney with something wonderful. Santa Claus and God are cousins. – *Andy Rooney*

Good God, how much reverence can you have for a Supreme Being who finds it necessary to include such phenomena as phlegm and tooth-decay in His divine system of creation?
– *Joseph Heller*

AM I DOING IT RIGHT?

Kristiane Fallarcuna,

a humanist parent in the Philippines

(Transcribed from a post by Ms. Fallarcuna of Humanist Alliance Philippines International, 3/1/2019, and forwarded by John Wagner.)

In this country that is mostly religious, there came a time in my life that I questioned my parenting ... "Am I doing it right?" There are voices here and there saying to me:

"That's not the right way ... Your kids don't go to church and don't believe in 'god/s' ... Your kids don't pray before meal, after meal and before sleep. Don't they know how to be grateful with all the blessings in life? Your kids express their opinions, even if it's about not believing in 'god/s', and people find it ridiculous, and even offensive. They don't do what other 'normal' kids do. They might lose their path and not learn goodness and morality. Are you teaching them well? Are you giving them their right to have a religion? Are you giving them the opportunity to open their mind and heart to the savior Jesus?"

"Obviously not. You're teaching them to become irreligious just like you are now. You were taught to be religious. You were once very religious [but] you don't teach the same things that you learned from religion. Your kids might grow up the wrong way."

I was reared in a Christian family. I grew up praying and trusting my fate to the God that my religion taught me about. I was active in church and did what a "good Christian" had to do (I even contemplated entering a convent). I think my name was even taken from this religion.

I was struck and affected by these questions. I came to a point that I even questioned my ways and my reality. I felt gaslighted by the norm. Am I doing it right? Am I a good parent? Am I teaching them well? Am I doing it right?

Finally, I found the answers inside me, in the same parts where those questions roamed around. In my mind, by using it well. In my heart, by loving sincerely. In my past, the lessons that it left.

I'm doing it right!

I'm not saying that parents who don't do what I do are doing it wrong. Good parents do their best for their children and I say #NoToParentJudging. You'll know in your heart if you're doing it right.

I'm doing it right!

My kids don't go to church because they don't have to. Our belief doesn't require or encourage us to. As a humanist or atheist or irreligious, obviously believing in deity/s is not our thing. But that doesn't make us less human.

My kids don't pray because it has no relevance to our belief, but it does not mean that they are ungrateful. They are grateful every day for the littlest things, and they show it by giving back. Their love is the sincerest that I've got.

My kids express their opinions because they know their rights. They don't intend to offend, they are just being honest, and even patient. When others tell them that they might go to hell for being irreligious, they just shrug it off,

understanding why these people came up to that statement. They respect others beliefs; don't they have the right to get such respect and express their beliefs too?

My kids do what other "normal" kids do. They play, they learn, they grow and, most importantly, they think.

They have high levels of empathy and respect, so I'm confident they will grow to be good and moral individuals. They were taught the values that humans must possess.

I'm not perfect but I'm doing my best to teach them well. I'm giving them the right to learn morality as what they truly deserve.

I'm giving them the opportunity to open their minds and hearts, not to any deity/s, but to reality, to science, to the world ... and to humanity.

I'm teaching them to become irreligious just as I am now. What do you expect? Do Christian parents teach their kids to become Muslim or vice versa?

What I am in the past does not mean that they should be too in the future. Things change. We learn, we change, we are redirected. What I am now, what I believe now, is my business. I'll teach my kids the things that I believe are right.

They might grow up the wrong way? How could that be when they are doing the right things, the good things, holding love and empathy in their heart, and not book/s that tell about violence, punishments, and myths?

Because I'm doing it right. And I'm confident of that.

Peace and love to all.

TRUMP AND THE ANNIHILATION OF SHAME

Bret Stephens

(Excerpted from the New York Times OpEd page, 4/12/19)

I had never heard of Charles Van Doren until, in college, I saw the movie "Quiz Show", and I probably never thought of him again until I read his obituary this week in *The Times*. Van Doren, if you didn't know, was the polished scion of a distinguished American literary family, who in the 1950s was a champion contestant on the NBC show "Twenty-One", dazzling millions of viewers with what looked like preternatural erudition.

But the show had been rigged, the contestants coached, their fates determined by the need of the producers to manufacture drama and maintain ratings. When the truth came out, America was scandalized and Van Doren nearly ruined.

"I would give almost anything I have to reverse the course of my life in the last three years," he told a congressional committee in 1959, after finally coming clean about what he had done (along with other contestants). He spent the remainder of his 93 years living a decidedly quiet and unblemished life.

How quaint.

Had Van Doren come along a few decades later, there would have been no big scandal in fabricating reality and no great shame in participating in it. The lines between fame and infamy would have blurred, and both could be monetized. Personal disgrace might have been explained away as a form of victimization by a greedy corporation, an

unloving parent, systemic social forces — or with the claim, possibly true, that nearly everybody does it.

The contrast between then and now is worth pondering in the Age of Trump — an age whose signature feature isn't populism or nationalism or any other -ism. It's the attempted annihilation of shame. Shame is neither sin nor folly. It's what people are supposed to feel in the commission, recollection or exposure of sin and folly.

In days bygone, the prescribed method for avoiding shame was behaving well. Or, if it couldn't be avoided, feeling deep remorse and performing some sort of penance. By contrast, the Trumpian method for avoiding shame is not giving a damn. Spurious bone-spur draft deferment? Shrug. Fraudulent business and charitable practices? Snigger. Outrageous personal invective? Sneer. Inhumane treatment of children at the border? Snarl. Hush-money payoffs to a porn-star and centerfold mistresses? Stud!

The annihilation of shame requires two things. First, nerve: Whatever else might be said about Trump, it takes immense brass to lie as frequently and flagrantly as he does without apparently triggering any kind of internal emotional crisis. Ordinary mortals tend to blush when caught out in some kind of mischief. Trump smirks.

But it also takes public acquiescence. Van Doren might have succeeded in quickly burying his shame if the revelation of his cheating hadn't led to tidal waves of dismay and disdain. The United States of the 1950s wasn't yet the land of premature exoneration. A half-century after the scandal, when Van Doren finally wrote about his experiences in an essay for *The New Yorker*, he confessed, "It's been hard to get away, partly because the man who cheated on 'Twenty-One' is still part of me."

Will the cheaters of today ... feel the same kind of self-reproach in 10 or 20 years? Hard to say, though I doubt it. ...

It was once the useful role of conservatives to resist these sorts of trends — to stand athwart declining moral standards, yelling Stop. They lost whatever right they had to play that role when they got behind Trump, not only acquiescing in the culture of shamelessness but also savoring its fruits. Among them: Never being beholden to what they said or wrote yesterday. Never holding themselves to the standards they demand of others. Never having to say they are sorry.

Trump-supporting conservatives — the self-aware ones, at least — justify this bargain as a price worth paying in order to wage ideological combat against the hypostatized evil left. In fact it only makes them enablers in the degraded culture they once deplored. ...

Not everyone has to succumb to this culture. In his *New Yorker* essay, Van Doren revealed that in the early 1990s he was offered \$100,000 by the makers of "Quiz Show" to serve as a "guarantee of [the film's] truthfulness". Van Doren admits he was tempted, but at the urging of his wife he turned the money down. Even after more than 30 years of suffering and contrition, he chose not to profit from a dishonorable deed.

Van Doren died redeemed. Rest in peace.

WHAT CHILDHOOD BOOKS STILL SHAPE YOUR LIFE?

Last month we asked readers—that's *you*, people!—to tell us what books you read, pre-puberty, that influenced you, that still stand out as you-shapers. Response was meager, but choice.

What a creative, delightful request," says Cheryl Payer, and offers us her list:

- *Parade of Fairytales* (1945). A picture book, with stories from many nations and cultures, including Native American, each presented on one oversize page with a gorgeous eye-candy illustration (each by a different artist in a distinctive style) on the facing page. I regard this now as a relic of the optimistic, internationalist outlook in this country at the triumphant end of the Second World War. I took my ragged copy to an old Jewish bookbinder on the ungentrified Lower East Side for a reinforcement of the binding, and gave it to the infant granddaughter of old friends. May she, and her parents, enjoy it as much as I did.

- *My Poetry Book; an anthology of Modern Verse for Boys and Girls* (1934). It belonged first to my mother, then introduced me to all kinds of poetry, from Shakespeare to Carl Sandburg. As an adult I am sometimes struck by questions from memory for which only this treasury has the answers: What was the humorous poem about the man who thought his wife didn't work very much and traded chores for a day with her ("The Old Man Who Lived in a Wood"). What was the nonsense rhyme that even today reduces me to helpless giggles if I say it out loud ("Eletelephony" by Laura Elizabeth Richards). If you have a child in your life, beg, borrow, steal (or buy on the internet) a copy of this treasure. Or get a copy for the child in you.

- *The Complete Book of Marvels* (1941): by Richard Halliburton. When I first travelled to Mexico, I had to see Chichen Itza, because I had read about it in Halliburton. The author was a handsome (gay) celebrity, famous for his adult travel books about romantic stunts like retracing the route of the Odyssey. He vanished in 1939, somewhat like Amelia Earhart, on one of his quests in the Pacific. My fourth-grade teacher, who recommended this, was in love with his books and still hoped for his rescue, a decade after his disappearance. I have visited many of the sites he wrote about (Carcassonne, the Taj Mahal) and will never make it to many others, but at this point I am sure the reality will not be as good as the way I imagined it while reading this book.

When I was ten or so, the A&P (remember them?) had a supermarket giveaway. Every week, they would give another volume of the *Funk & Wagnall's Encyclopedia* free with my mother's groceries. When I wasn't outdoors playing sports I had my nose buried in these volumes. I didn't comprehend most of what was in them but they introduced me to a world outside of my suburban Connecticut circle. Those volumes gave me the gift of curiosity. Fortunately, I have never fully recovered. — Dennis Kendrick

Off-hand I can think of only two: C.W. Ceram's *Gods, Graves and Scholars*, and Arthur Ransome's *Old Peter's Russian Tales*. — Dorothy Kahn

READERS RESPOND

John: Good to see you have a succession plan underway at SHSNY with Engel the new president and you still active. You've made something valuable and lasting there and I'm very glad of it. Best, – *Roy Speckhardt*

Hi John: I wanted to compliment you on another excellent issue of PIQUE [April] and an impressive tenure as President of SHSNY. It's good to hear you'll still be involved with the newsletter. – *Phil Pollack*

OOPS

Hi John: Edd Doerr's haiku ("Subtler Than Pascal ...", PIQUE, April) is wonderful, but the reference (in the headline) should be to Descartes, not Pascal. – *Peter Rogatz*

Reply: Thank you, Peter. No excuses, just a brainfart. – JR

I've come up with the set of rules that describe our reactions to technologies: 1. Anything that is in the world when you're born is normal and ordinary and is just a natural part of the way the world works. 2. Anything that's invented between when you're fifteen and thirty-five is new and exciting and revolutionary and you can probably get a career in it. 3. Anything invented after you're thirty-five is against the natural order of things. – *Douglas Adams*

MAKE OF THIS WHAT YOU WILL

John Rafferty

After forcing the resignation last month of Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielson, who was as heartless as he liked but not quick enough about caging kids, Donald Trump purged more "not-tough-enough" top officials at the Department and began replacing them with even viler hatchet men whose "Acting" titles protected their lack of qualifications from being exposed in Senate confirmation hearings.

All the while, the Department was being moved to a new D.C. headquarters in a building formerly called The Government Hospital For The Insane.

Breaking news:

TRUMP FLIES "RESCUE MISSION" TO NOTRE DAME

Washington, D.C.: Responding to the recent horrific devastation of Notre Dame, President Donald J. Trump ordered Air Force One loaded with emergency supplies (rolls of paper towels, Bibles, copies of *The Art of the Deal*) then boarded the presidential jet last night and personally ordered it flown to South Bend, Indiana.

Donald J. Trump rescues
Notre Dame
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Are we ready for A.I.?
Page 4

"National Day of Prayer"
is a national disgrace
Page 1

Day of Reason Brunch
at Pete's, Sun, May 5.
Reserve now - Page 7

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